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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL MO AG WI

SUBJECT: MOROCCO: SEVEN SAHRAWI HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS
CHARGED WITH INTELLIGENCE COOPERATION WITH A FOREIGNER

Classified By: Gregory Thome, Political Counselor, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Seven Sahrawi activists who had participated in a heavily publicized visit to Algiers and to the Polisario camps in Tindouf, Algeria, were arrested in Casablanca upon their return on October 8. The activists were charged with "intelligence cooperation with a foreign entity" after they made inflammatory comments about King Mohammed VI, expressed their support for the Polisario, and participated in a military parade in what is technically still a war zone under ceasefire. Moroccan media and civil society expressed widespread indignation over the behavior of the activists, while GOM officials expressed deep concern to us privately that the activists were seeking, in part, to undermine the recently resumed UN-brokered Western Sahara negotiations. Other pro-independence human rights activists have confirmed that, following a brief detention, the seven had been in contact with their families and lawyers. The Embassy has received assurances from the Moroccan Government that it will treat the activists in accordance with human rights norms.
END SUMMARY.

Seven Arrests

¶2. (SBU) Seven Sahrawi human rights activists who had participated in a controversial visit to the Polisario camps in Tindouf, Algeria, were immediately arrested by Moroccan police in Casablanca upon their return on October 8. Those arrested include: Ali Salem Tamek, Brahim Dahane, Rachid Sghair, Nassiri Hamadi, Yahdih Terrousi, Saleh Loubeïhi and Degja Lechgar (the only woman among the group). All seven of the Sahrawis are members or heads of various recognized or unrecognized human rights NGOs. Their pro-Sahara independence views were generally known but, until recently, they had mainly focused their activism on legitimate human rights questions. As importantly, they had always maintained a distance from the Polisario, knowing that close, overtly political ties might undermine their legitimacy on human rights issues. In this way, they had established contacts with Human Rights Watch and other legitimate human rights groups, and wide access to the media. This visit to Tindouf was a stark departure from those practices, and the seven clearly used their credibility and contacts with the media to attract a large press presence for their visits in Tindouf, which they then used to make extremely harsh criticisms of the GOM. In one press conference, which aired on Algerian television, they referred to King Mohammed as a "fascist" and made other highly provocative statements that enraged both the GOM and most of the Moroccan press.

GOM Fears Impact on W. Sahara Negotiations

¶13. (C) Ambassador Nasser Bourita, the Moroccan MFA Director General for Multilateral and Global Affairs (and Foreign Minister Fassi Fihri's Chief of Staff), informed PolCouns prior to the arrests that the seven would be detained, although he was unsure at the time what they would be charged with. The GOM subsequently informed the press that the individuals would be charged with "intelligence cooperation with a foreign entity" and brought before a Casablanca court.

¶14. (C) Bourita explained to PolCouns why the Moroccans were so incensed by these developments. In addition to the fascist comment about the King and other rash statements, the seven held highly publicized meetings with several members of the "shadow" Polisario government; while their pro-independence views had been known and tolerated, the GOM was furious that they had now made such open endorsements of the Polisario. Moreover, the Polisario organized festivities for the group that included an actual military parade complete with men in uniform and tanks (he showed PolCouns photos that the seven had apparently released to their press contacts). Bourita viewed this as a tremendous provocation and quite likely a violation of the cease-fire that is still in effect in an area that remains, technically, a war zone. He also expressed concerns that the seven intended to turn their visit into a publicity stunt that would provoke a negative impact on new UN Special Representative Ross's effort to revitalize Western Sahara negotiations by increasing Polisario and/or Algerian intransigence.

Human Rights Respected

¶15. (C) In the past, authorities have been known to mistreat Sahrawi activists, especially when they engage in overtly political activities that the GOM considers dangerous to its interests. However, in the case of these arrests, our contacts expressed confidence that their rights would be respected. Ahmed Herzenni, President of Consultative Commission on Human Rights (CCDH) told PolOffs that, "as a citizen," he considered the activists, behavior extremely unpatriotic and even treasonous. However, from a human rights standpoint, he said he was absolutely sure none of them would be harmed, due to both their positions and the extensive media coverage they were receiving. Separately, Brahim Sabbar, Secretary General of the Sahrawie Association of Victims of Grave Violations of Human Rights (ASVDH), told PolOffs that the activists had been in contact with their families and with their lawyers. And even before they were arrested, Bourita reassured PolCouns that the seven would not be mistreated.

¶16. (C) COMMENT: In recent years, the GOM has made significant progress both in tolerating public "questioning of Morocco's territorial integrity" (local code for advocating Saharan independence) and in permitting Sahrawi separatists to travel abroad and voice their opinions. However, in this case the seven activists clearly went well beyond the Moroccans, slowly widening comfort zone. One of the seven, Ali Salem Tamek, told us privately several weeks ago that he intended to "get arrested" as a means of pushing the envelope, and this most recent provocation had truly touched a nerve. At this point, the GOM has remained well within its obligations in terms of respecting the seven activists, human rights, and we remain confident that there will be no mistreat. What remains to be seen is how this incident might affect what has been a growing Moroccan tolerance in terms of Sahrawi freedom of expression and movement. END COMMENT.

